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Calif. air board leader quits in dispute

By LAURA KURTZMAN - Associated Press Writer

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The executive director of a state agency charged with implementing a landmark global warming law resigned Monday, saying the governor's office made it impossible for her to do her job.

Catherine Witherspoon's resignation comes days after the California Air Resources Board's chairman, Robert Sawyer, was ousted by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I think they're trying to control it, and they don't have a very cogent vision for what's needed," said Witherspoon, who has managed the agency since 2003.

Witherspoon said she felt some of the governor's top aides were trying to keep information from him so he would not endorse more far-reaching action to put the global warming law into effect.

The law, the nation's first limit on greenhouse gas emissions, calls for a 25 percent reduction by 2020.

Witherspoon painted a picture of a governor who was being misled and micromanaged by a staff that was trying to weaken the global warming law out of fear that it would harm businesses.

The picture is at odds with the governor's carefully tended public image as an environmental champion.

Echoing a complaint that both Democratic legislative leaders have made, Witherspoon said the governor's top aides were single-mindedly focused on using market-based mechanisms to implement the law, even though other methods, particularly regulation, are needed to meet the law's tough standards.

At a news conference Monday, Schwarzenegger insisted he was "in sync" with his staff on how to implement the global warming law. He said his goal is to implement the law.

"I don't get caught up in all this dialogue," Schwarzenegger said.

Schwarzenegger said Monday that he rescinded Sawyer's appointment because the retired University of California at Berkeley engineering professor had voted to grant a delay on new air standards for the San Joaquin Valley.

That move contradicted the state's push to get a federal waiver to regulate tailpipe emissions under the Clean Air Act, the governor said.

Witherspoon said Sawyer was fired because two top Schwarzenegger aides wanted him to go more slowly in implementing the law.

"It's utterly mystifying," she said. "They're firing quality people who know how to do the job."

Adam Mendelsohn, Schwarzenegger's spokesman, has said Sawyer was moving too slowly, "scrambling at the last minute" to find ways to implement the law.

In an interview Monday, Sawyer said that the governor's office originally wanted only one early action item, but that he pushed for more.

He said the governor's staff did not understand the global warming issue well enough to implement the law, so the technical issues should be left to the Air Resources Board.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, said he was troubled by the upheaval at the air board and promised to hold a hearing to investigate Sawyer's and Witherspoon's allegations on Friday.

Witherspoon has worked for the board two separate times, from 1981 to 1994 and again from 1999 until now. She became executive director in 2003. Schwarzenegger appointed Sawyer board chairman in December 2005.

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